

*Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport*, edited by Carrington, B. & McDonald, I., Abingdon, Routledge, 2009, 250pp., £25.99 ISBN 978-0-415-37541-2.

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Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald's anthology *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport* – the eighth volume in Routledge's admirable Critical Studies in Sport series – successfully addresses all three of the aims outlined in the Series Editors' Preface. The introduction, which provides 'a brief historical overview of the development of Marxist approaches within Sport Studies and the subsequent growth of a Marxist inflected Cultural Studies of Sport' (p1), along with Part One, which comprises a chapter each by Carrington and McDonald arguing for the relative merits of orthodox (but not reductive, economist) Marxist and Cultural Studies approaches, in the words of the editors, 'attempt to sketch the broad parameters of the debates (the thesis and the antithesis, we might suggest) between and within Marxist and Cultural Studies approaches to sport, which the following chapters then, and in true dialectical fashion, work through' (p7). Even on their own, they are enough to satisfy the first aim: 'to introduce students to the richness and relevance of Marxist and Marxist-inflected Cultural Studies approaches to studying contemporary sporting cultures' (pxii).

The subsequent chapters – divided into three further sections: Part Two ('Political Economy, Commodification and Sport'), Part Three ('The Sporting Poetics of Class, Race and Gender'), and Part Four ('Key Concepts, Critical Theorists') – successfully address another aim: to 'advance discussions on critical social theory within Sport Studies and to attempt to insert sport as an object of study into mainstream debates within Marxist scholarship and Cultural Studies' (pxii). Each chapter is written by an established academic (some from within Sport Studies, some from other disciplines), and provides authoritative analysis alongside a wealth of footnotes. These include: Anouk Bélanger's examination of 'The Urban Sport Spectacle' and the importance of large-scale sporting events to the political economies of nation-states in a chapter that is extremely timely in light of the London 2012 Olympics and England's unsuccessful bid for the 2018 Fifa

World Cup; Garry Whannel's critical analysis of the development of Cultural Studies alongside a consideration of 'Media Sport'; and Rob Beamish's reading of Coubertin's Olympic project through the concept of 'alienation'.

The final aim – to provide 'a provocation to radical and critical scholars in Sport Studies to connect their research and analysis to the transformative potential of sport', to address 'the problematic of intervention', and to 'question...what it actually means to be engaged in radical theory and social research' (pxii) – is also met, albeit with some reservations. Carrington and McDonald make clear in their introductory chapter that the volume as a whole exhibits 'no "party line" as to how Marxism is understood and its relationship to Cultural Studies approaches to the study of sport', and suggest that the 'collection's strength lies precisely in the polyvocality of differing authors, from distinct disciplinary backgrounds, addressing the core themes of the book in their own disciplinary-specific yet rigorous way' (p7). This evaluation is a fair one: over the course of the book, theories are worked and re-worked, often clashing antagonistically in a way that is intellectually stimulating in the best traditions of Leftist thought. In this sense, one imagines that the book will prove stimulating and exciting for younger scholars relatively new to the world of ideas in general, and the critical study of sport in particular, as well as for more mature intellectuals.

However, despite the fact that this dialogical process is invigorating, there slowly emerges the realization that the book embodies one of the main frustrations of being, in a general sense, of the Left: the historical and continual inability to get anywhere near close enough to an agreed strategy that has real potential for effective application. While the Right speaks in black and white, forming simple narratives that are relatively easy to understand and to put into action, the intellectual Left remains a site of constant and violently conflicting discourse. As such, there is little sense here that the great divide between orthodox / revolutionary Marxism and Post-Marxism and / or Cultural Studies is anywhere near rapprochement. The ire from the supporters of the former position towards central figures of the latter (such as Laclau and Mouffe) is strong and rarely disguised, with Cultural Studies' penchant for focusing on identity politics without adequate consideration of material

conditions a (justifiably) favourite target. That said, one would suggest that the best kind of Cultural Studies – that which analyzes identity politics with an eye firmly on the economic base, while also pointing to the limits of orthodox approaches – is represented in this volume: by Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, whose chapter ‘Venus and Serena are “Doing It” for Themselves’ argues that ‘any twenty-first century conceptualization of Black feminisms must move beyond a totalizing narrative towards a more dynamic reconfiguration, which is heterogeneous in process and contradictory in nature’ (p132); and by Brett St. Louis, whose critique of US college sports and the ‘capitalist-athletic complex’ through a reading of Black Marxist intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire, C.L.R. James, and Frantz Fanon, seeks to resolve the fissure between orthodox Marxism and Cultural Studies, and to link theory and praxis. From this, St. Louis ultimately posits a positive theoretical vision of sport beyond capitalism.

However upbeat St. Louis is, though, the volume is underpinned by a latent pessimism that on occasion rears its head. Examples include Ian McDonald’s statement that, due to the depth of capitalism’s grasp on sport and society, ‘At most, it seems that all we can and must do is engage in rearguard and defensive strategies: such as exposing relations of power, engaging in campaigns for equality, formulating critiques’ (p44), and David L. Andrews’ view that ‘currently there would appear to be no sustainable, viable or, indeed, even imaginable alternatives to the late capitalist, corporatist iteration of sport’ (p223). There are other moments of optimism, notably in Grant Farred’s imaginative and speculative essay on Liverpool Football Club, class, and identity, where the author’s passion as a fan is clear. But while Farred’s reading of Steven Gerrard’s aborted transfer to Chelsea in 2005 suggests that a sense of loyalty to his class and city sets Gerrard apart from the stereotype of the money-grabbing footballer – and, as such, that there remains miniscule moments of resistance to market forces even in the Premier League – one hopes he never reads Graham Johnson’s *Football and Gangsters* (2006, pp 97 – 104) which might kill his belief not only in Gerrard’s goodness, and the theory on which his chapter rests, but also in humanity.

The final section of the book includes essays on three individual theorists whose work is considered to be of particular usefulness in the study

of sport: a brief, but deliciously combative argument for the relevance of Foucault, by Toby Miller; an impassioned argument that recent Cultural Studies has 'reinvented' a Gramsci stripped of his revolutionary impulse, by Alan Bairner; and an essay on the usefulness of Fredric Jameson's critique of 'Late Capitalism', by David L. Andrews.

The editors note at the beginning of the book that 'there is no contemporary book that directly engages the Marxist tradition and its application to sports scholarship' (p6), and, as such, *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport* fills a huge gap. As a means by which to engage intellectually-curious undergraduates with an interest in the critical study of sport, and as a means for attempting to make sense of current sport policy – whereby the country is spending billions hosting the Olympics and bidding for World Cups while depriving its schools of adequate funding for grassroots sport – this volume is indispensable.

## References

Johnson, G., *Football and Gangsters: How Organised Crime Controls the Beautiful Game*, Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2006.